

Firmly Committed to Growing the U.S. Fleet

The secretary of the United States Navy on what it takes to protect and project U.S. power.

By Ray Mabus

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Size matters. It's as true for America's Navy as anywhere. It is the size of our fleet that uniquely enables the United States Navy and Marine Corps to maintain presence around the globe, around the clock. That presence has kept the peace and promoted prosperity via trade across open sea lanes for nearly seven decades.

The U.S. has the most powerful Navy in the world, but comparing the size of our fleet directly to other nations' fleets—as pundits and politicians of late have done—is fundamentally flawed. As America's "Away Team," the U.S. Navy protects and projects our leadership role because it can get anywhere faster, stay longer and carry everything it needs to execute its missions—all without needing anyone else's permission.

In the first 54 days of the air campaign against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria, for example, the U.S. relied solely on Navy F/A-18 Hornets flying sorties from the sovereign territory provided by the USS George H.W. Bush in the Persian Gulf. Land-based bombers were delayed until host nations granted approval.

To combat Ebola in West Africa, V-22 Ospreys put Marines on the ground the same day as President Obama's order, providing logistical support to doctors. During Operation Tomadachi, following the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in 2011, more than 16 ships, 130 aircraft and 12,000 U.S. sailors and Marines delivered 340 tons of supplies.

Since World War II, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps have secured the high seas, enabling 90% of world-wide seaborne trade and 95% of voice and data transfer carried by undersea cables to move without interruption.

But maintaining the U.S. Navy's global presence requires continued investment in ships. President Obama's fiscal year 2016 budget calls for \$161 billion to fund our assigned missions and continue to grow our fleet. The challenging fiscal climate demands aggressive efforts to cut costs intelligently. We have and we will continue to do so, but not at the expense of maintaining presence. Cutting ships would jeopardize U.S. security and the global economy.

Because of America's leadership role, no secretary of the Navy can base his decisions solely on a snapshot of America's current capabilities relative to others around the globe. My charge is to evaluate the fleet's size and combat readiness, including needed repairs and maintenance, in the face of sequestration and an increasing global need for naval forces to maintain peace and prosperity.

Before my tenure, our ship count was declining and our procurement strategy was making it worse. On Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists struck the homeland, the U.S. Navy had 316 ships. When I took office in 2009, the fleet had declined to 278 ships despite a defense buildup. In the five years before I became secretary, the Navy contracted to build only 27 ships, insufficient to

even maintain the fleet because of the number of older ships being retired. In my first five years as secretary, we put 70 ships under contract, and we plan to expand the fleet to more than 300 ships before the end of the decade.

We've done this, despite continuing fiscal uncertainty, with business fundamentals: fixed-price contracts, tough negotiations and multiyear procurement and block-buy contracting that lowers costs. Good business practices have allowed us to save money while providing more than 400,000 well-paying jobs directly or indirectly related to ship building and maritime industry.

To augment our forward deployed force I and our senior officers have advanced international partnerships, not only with our long-standing allies, but also with dozens of like-minded nations around the world. Partnerships are a force multiplier, maintaining our global presence, while encouraging others to bear their fair share of international security. We seek to preserve the peace, but should an adversary challenge us, I never want U.S. sailors and Marines engaged in a fair fight.

Along with the chief of Naval Operations and the commandant of the Marine Corps, I will continue to work together with the president and Congress to responsibly man, train and equip a Navy and Marine Corps that remains the most powerful expeditionary fighting force in the world. America can afford no less.

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